

New forms of cooperation between the Helsinki University Museum and university students

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Resumo

As colecções da Universidade de Helsínquia serão transferidas durante o ano de 2003 para um edifício no centro da cidade. Algumas destas colecções são representativas de mais de 360 anos de história da própria Universidade, enquanto outras estão directamente relacionadas com a história do ensino e investigação, nomeadamente história da medicina, da veterinária, da medicina dentária, geologia, têxteis, vestuário e design. Até à data, as colecções encontravam-se disponíveis para visita apenas por marcação prévia. Porém, a partir do outono de 2003 estarão permanentemente expostas ao público no novo edifício. As relações com os estudantes da Universidade constituirão uma prioridade do programa do novo Museu e este artigo apresenta as razões que se encontram na base desse objectivo e explica como este se concretizará na prática.

Abstract

The small museum collections of the University of Helsinki will be transferred to excellent new facilities right in the city centre. Some of these collections specialise in the more than 360-year history of the University and in the history of Finnish science, while others are concerned with the history of medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry, geology, and textiles, clothing and craft design. Previously, the collections were open only by appointment, but from autumn 2003 onwards, they will be open to the general public. The new museum will devote much effort to co-operation with students. The University will continue to develop its museum studies module and in the future students may be able to complete their practical training periods at the University Museum. These and other forms of co-operation will be outlined in this article.

Introduction

The new Helsinki University Museum will open its new premises in November 2003. In addition to the objects and documents pertaining to the history of the University, the museum will house the collections of medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine. Furthermore, the Mineralogical Division of the Finnish Museum of Natural History, which is another major museum operating under the University of Helsinki, will return to the renovated museum building where, in fact, it has been located since the completion of the building in 1869. The museum will exhibit the history of Finnish

scholarship and the history of the University of Helsinki, which went hand in hand for about 300 years. So far, Finland has not had a museum exclusively specialising in the history of science and scholarship.

New facilities, new challenges

The new museum will be located in the former laboratory and museum building constructed for the University in the centre of Helsinki in 1869. The building has strong museological traditions: it is the oldest building in Finland which has continuously housed museums since its completion.

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It is protected as a national monument and the four-stories-high cast-iron staircase is of great architectural interest. The museum will have an exhibition space of 1,300 square metres. There will also be a café, a museum shop, and a library on medical history. In the building, there is a large auditorium which will offer new opportunities for the museum.

Up until now, the small museums to be incorporated into the new Helsinki University Museum have operated under highly disadvantageous conditions, resorting under the auspices of various faculties and departments. The development of these small museums has probably followed patterns similar to those in other universities: the collections originally used for teaching purposes have turned into museum exhibitions, which are open to the public rather irregularly and are, from a museological viewpoint,

often inadequately maintained. Not enough expertise or funds have been available and, thus, the maintenance of the collections has been the responsibility of part-time employees and even of retired volunteers (HEINÄMIES 2001).

The former University Museum was established in 1978 as a separate administrative unit governed by the University's administrative director. At that time, the Museum was assigned the task of charting the history of the University of Helsinki. It was later decided that the new Museum would also become a separate unit placed under the supervision of the Director of Administration, with the University assuming full financial responsibility for the Museum's operations. The University has always played a major role in Finnish culture and through its own Museum, the University acknowledges its responsibility for

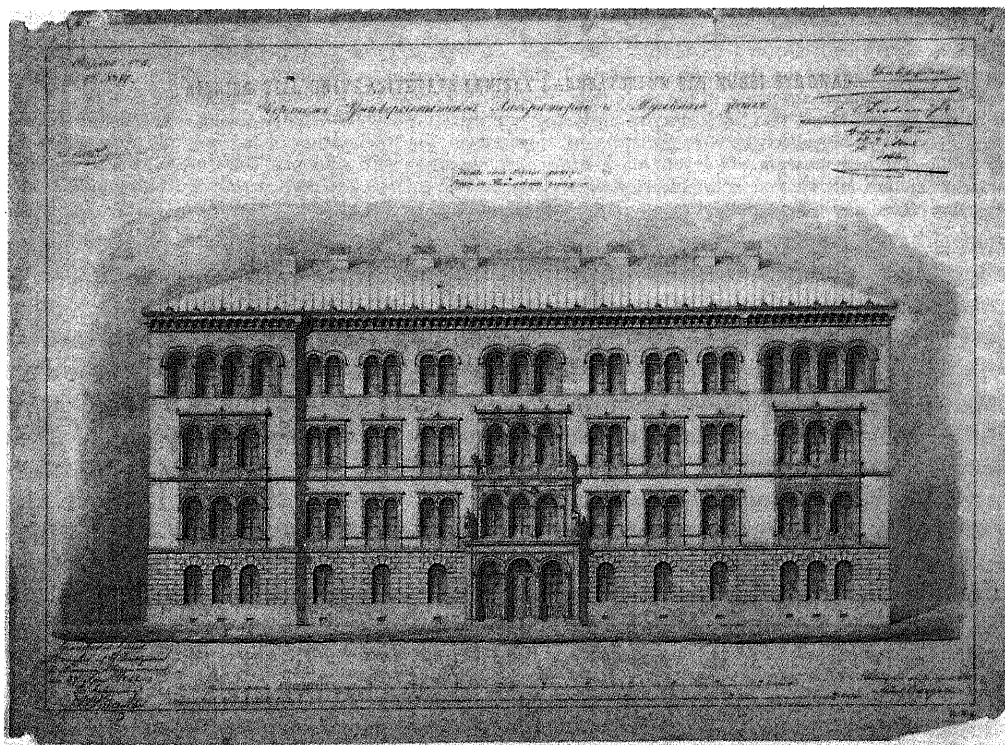


Fig. 1 – The new Helsinki University Museum will be located in the former Laboratory of Chemistry and Ethnographical Museum, completed in 1869 and designed by C.A. Edelfelt (Photo: Photographic service of the University of Helsinki, Helsinki University Museum).

preserving its unique cultural heritage. The Museum also supports the University's educational mission by transmitting Finnish culture from one generation to the next and by informing the general public of the work being carried out at the University.

Inaugurated at the beginning of 2003, the new Helsinki University Museum will be appropriately staffed for being open to the public on a regular basis. This will be a important improvement compared to the present situation, where most of the collections are available to the public by appointment only and the number of annual visitors has not exceeded a few hundred. However, as the number of staff will continue to be restricted, new forms of cooperation with the expert staff and students of university departments will be in great demand.

Students: an untapped resource for university museums

Until now, students have made little use of the University Museum and have been quite conventional in their approach. History students are the only group to regularly visit the Museum to learn about the history of Finnish science. In contrast, the Medical History Museum has traditionally been used quite extensively in teaching. In fact, the Museum was previously known as the Medical History Museum and Department. The Medical History Museum has arranged courses in medical history for prospective doctors and nurses and has offered archival and pictorial resources to students and scholars. However, the students themselves have not participated in developing the University's museums or in generating ideas for exhibitions.

The University of Helsinki is in the process of enhancing teaching in museum studies on the undergraduate level by establishing a lectureship in the field. Until now, courses in museum studies have been held by a part-time department coordinator. The aim is that the lecturer in museum studies will work in close cooperation with the University Museum and it is precisely these forms of cooperation that have been explored during the autumn of 2002.

A small space in the new museum is reserved for temporary exhibitions. This space could provide students of museum studies with the opportunity to design and mount an exhibition under the supervision of the lecturer in museum studies at some point during their studies. While the students would be responsible for the content provision and mounting of the exhibition, as well as for producing written exhibition materials and acting as guides, the museum would provide the necessary facilities and funds. In recent years students of museum studies have organised small exhibitions in various smaller local museums around Finland as part of their thesis work. Now, the students will be given the opportunity to arrange similar exhibitions for a far larger public in the vicinity of their faculty.



Fig. 2 – The cast-iron staircase in the new Museum (Photo: Jussi Tiainen, The University of Helsinki).

Naturally, the University Museum will provide training positions not only for students of museum studies, but also for students of archaeology, ethnology, history and art history. The Finnish government supports the practical training of university students by subsidising their salaries, either fully or partly. In most cases the trainees are employed by the public sector, in jobs related to their studies, over a period of three months during the summer. The goal of the practical training is to familiarise students with the professional tasks related to their field of study and to enhance their ability to apply theoretical knowledge in these tasks. Apart from offering students an insider's view of working life, the training also provides them with work experience, which will be a valuable asset when seeking employment after graduation. The duties of museum trainees will involve the everyday running of a museum. In addition to collections management, they will conduct guided tours, with an emphasis on interacting with visitors.

Guided tours need not be limited to the confines of the museum: students could also lead guided walks on University premises and inform visitors about the University's history and its research activities. The new University Museum is ideally located for this purpose: it is situated near Senate Square in the middle of the City Centre Campus and thus in the very heart of Helsinki. In 2000, when Helsinki was one of the European Cultural Capitals, similar tours were already organised. Over a period of one month, students arranged guided tours in the vicinity of Senate Square. Visitors were allowed access to buildings and sites of historical interest in the city centre which otherwise remain closed to the general public, including premises owned by the University, the City of Helsinki and the

State (for instance the Council of State building). Interested visitors were also offered special theme tours led by experts. The geological tours, for example, which provided information on the different types and origins of stone used in the construction of the city, were especially popular.

The Museum's obligations towards its trainees should not be underestimated: for many students, a training place is their first point of contact with working life. The Museum staff must therefore guide and advise students, assigning to them duties as versatile as possible, and introduce them to all aspects of the work being carried out at the Museum so that the experiences gained during the practical training will help students to clarify their career objectives. Many of the students who complete the training will later be recruited by the Museum, thus bringing in new ideas and up-to-date information about developments in the field.

It is important that students will regard the Helsinki University Museum as their own museum. Coincidentally, the student nations, the oldest student societies in Finland, celebrate their 360th anniversary in 2003, the same year in which the new University Museum will be opened. Students of the University of Helsinki wanted to celebrate the occasion by organising an exhibition and various other related events. The first special exhibition of the new museum will thus feature student life and the activities of the student societies (nations). The planning of this exhibition has been left to the students themselves and it will offer a less formal alternative to the perhaps somewhat drier permanent exhibition at the Helsinki University Museum, which may encourage a wider range of people to visit the Museum.

Reference

HEINÄMIES, K. 2001. Funding and museum ownership. In: M. KELLY (ed.) *Managing university museums: education and skills*, pp. 163-168. OECD, Paris.